



Case report

Skin messages in suicide – An unusual occurrence



Amy E. Austin BHLthSci (Hons) PhD Candidate, Roger W. Byard MD Forensic Pathologist*

School of Medical Sciences, The University of Adelaide, Frome Rd, Forensic Science SA, Adelaide, SA, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 September 2012
Received in revised form
27 December 2012
Accepted 2 March 2013
Available online 4 April 2013

Keywords:

Suicide
Note
Skin messaging
Premeditation
Incidence

ABSTRACT

Notes are found in only a minority of cases of suicide and occasionally may involve writing messages on skin surfaces. A prospective study was undertaken for cases of suicide with skin messaging over a 12-year period from 1/1/2000 to 31/12/2011. A total of 498 cases of suicide were examined with only 2 cases (0.4%) having suicide notes written on their skin. Both cases involved young males (aged 18 and 30 years respectively) with the deaths occurring by hanging. In both cases typical parchmented ligature marks were present around the neck running up to the point of suspension. Both decedents had written messages on their hands/arms expressing mixtures of sorrow and hopelessness. There were no other suicide notes present. It is not clear whether writing on skin rather than on more conventional material suggests that the suicide may not have been planned, or instead that the decedent wanted to ensure that the message was found. Messages on skin may be slightly different to messages written on other surfaces, as space is limited and pens and markers may not write as effectively. An additional problem with skin messages is their vulnerability to erasure, making clear documentation of these findings at the scene important.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd and Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Suicides represent a significant proportion of deaths in many communities with rates being influenced by nationality, age and gender. For example, the highest suicide rates have been reported amongst males in Lithuania and the Russian Federation with 53.9 cases per 100,000 population per year. This compares to suicide rates amongst females in Greece of only 1.2 per 100,000 per year.¹ Methods of suicide also vary greatly depending on the availability of methods, with gunshot deaths being most popular in the United States, hanging in Australia, poisoning in China, and jumping from heights in Singapore.^{1,2}

The diagnosis of suicide may not always be straightforward, with drug toxicity, drowning and single vehicle car crashes being examples of situations where the exact intent of the decedent may not be known. One feature that has been used to support suicidal intentions is the presence of a so-called 'suicide note' where the victim has documented his or her intention to take their own life.³ In the following study the incidence and nature of notes written on the skin of the victim as an unusual form of suicide note have been examined.

2. Materials and methods

All cases of suicide where the autopsy was performed by one of the authors (RWB) were prospectively examined for evidence of written notes on the skin over a 12 year period from 1/1/2000 to 31/12/2011. Each case was subject to a full police and coronial investigation. The nature of the message was documented and photographed and each case underwent a full autopsy examination. Case details were reviewed and summarized. The overall incidence of documented notes in all cases of suicide was not determined as it was considered that this may not be an accurate record due to variability in police records with possible under-reporting. A search of all autopsy files at Forensic Science SA was, however, retrospectively conducted for similar cases that had been documented over the same period.

3. Results

A total of 498 cases of suicide were prospectively examined with only 2 cases (0.4%) having suicide notes written on their skin. Both cases were young males (aged 18 and 30 years respectively) with the deaths due to hanging. In both cases typical parchmented ligature marks were present around the neck running up to a point of suspension. No other injuries or features were present to suggest an alternative manner of death and there were no underlying organic diseases identified that could have caused or contributed to death. The only unusual feature in the second case was the use of a

* Corresponding author. Discipline of Anatomy and Pathology, Level 3 Medical School North Building, The University of Adelaide, Frome Road, Adelaide 5005, Australia. Tel.: +61 8 8303 5441; fax: +61 8 8303 4408.

E-mail address: roger.byard@sa.gov.au (R.W. Byard).

plastic bag over the head in addition to the ligature around the neck. Toxicology revealed traces of tetrahydrocannabinol in one case, with no alcohol or other common drugs.

Both decedents had written messages on their hands/arms. In the first case the words: “I failed” and “It was my fault, I destroyed myself” were written in black marker pen on the right forearm (Fig. 1) (the victim was left handed). In the second case the words “No future” were written in blue ink on the back of the right hand, and the words “Ug-Lee, Lone-Lee, Dead-Lee, Sorry” were written on the back of the left hand (Fig. 2). There were no other suicide notes present. Although it is possible that the messages may not have been written by the decedents there was no evidence to suggest the involvement of any other individuals in these deaths.

Retrospective search of other autopsy files from Forensic Science SA over the same time period revealed a further three cases with documented handwritten messages on skin surfaces. These consisted of a 52-year-old male with death from hanging who had “cremation OK” written on his left hand; a 55-year-old male who died from carbon monoxide toxicity who had “I love xxx and look after our xxx” written on his left arm; and a 38-year-old male who jumped from a building who had illegible writing on his chest that included “RIP”.

4. Discussion

Notes are found in only 10–30% of cases of suicide and their significance has been debated.³ While it was once asserted that notes attested to the seriousness of the intent,⁴ the reverse is not true, with many victims of violent self-inflicted deaths by gunshot and vehicles (such as trains) not having left notes behind. In

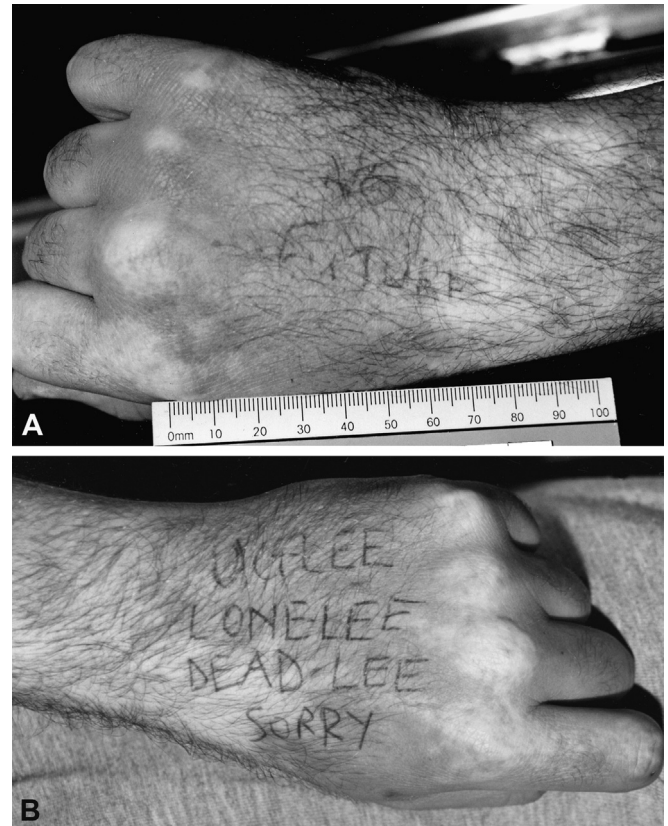


Fig. 2. The words “No future” written in blue ink on the back of the right hand of a suicide victim (a), and the words “Ug-Lee, Lone-Lee, Dead-Lee, Sorry” written on the back of the left hand (b). The words on the back of the right hand are less distinct.



Fig. 1. The right arm of a suicide victim with the words “I failed” (a) and “It was my fault, I destroyed myself” (b) written in black marker pen. There has been loss of detail in the words shown in (b).

addition it is difficult to delineate the typical profile of note writers. Although it has been asserted that most suicide victims who leave notes are either young or elderly females, there are many exceptions to this.³

Analyses of the contents of notes has shown that most are apologies for the act (74%), expressions of love for those left behind (60%), instructions for burial (48%), expressions of hopelessness (36%), or general advice (21%).⁵ There is also a difference in content with age, with notes written by younger individuals tending to be longer and more emotional, those of young to middle-aged adults being more angry with profane language, and those of the elderly being less emotive and more matter-of-fact, dealing with issues around chronic illness and pain, and concerns about being a burden to family and friends.³ In the two reported cases the “notes” expressed mixtures of sorrow and hopelessness. Two of the remaining three cases were instructions for cremation/burial and an expression of love, respectively. The writing in the third case was largely illegible.

Other difficulties that may arise around the investigation of apparent suicides, which may be clarified by the finding of a note, are whether multiple deaths are either joint suicides or murder suicides,^{6,7} or whether a death following a homicide was truly a suicide or was merely a miscalculation resulting in an accidental death.⁸ The mere finding of a note does not, however, guarantee that it had been written contemporaneously to the suicide. This possibility should always be born in mind when cases are being investigated.

The writing of messages on the skin is an unusual behaviour, with Demerci et al. finding no record of such behaviour in the literature before the reporting of their two cases in 2009.⁴ Part of

the present study represents a prospective investigation over a 12-year period revealing that such cases only occurred in 0.4% (2/498) of the suicides examined. Thus skin messaging was found significantly less often than standard suicide notes using conventional media. Given that the remaining three cases identified in Forensic Science SA files were not part of the prospective study they were not included in the determination of population data due to the possibility of under-reporting.

Alternative methods are now being used to send and record suicide messages and these include internet social networking sites, telephone texting and emailing.⁹ There is a concern that electronic transmission of such messages and intentions may lead to copy-cat, cluster cases, particularly amongst the young.⁹ Despite more modern techniques being utilized, however, simple transcribing of final messages still occurs, and rarely may involve writing on the skin. Whether the latter suggests that the suicide may not have been planned, as normal writing material such as paper was not used, is unclear. Alternatively, the decedent may want to ensure that the message is not overlooked. The nature of the skin surface may mean that such messages are also slightly different to messages written down on other surfaces, as space is limited on available skin surfaces, and pens and markers may not write as effectively.

Another issue that arises with skin messages is their vulnerability to erasure. As can be seen in both of the reported cases there had been some loss of detail on the forearm in case 1 and on the back of the right hand in case 2. This also occurred with one of the other cases where “RIP” was the only distinguishable marking. Loss of detail may occur from simple movement of the body against clothing and also if the body is moist or is cleaned prior to examination. Careful assessment of areas of the body, such as the limbs, that are accessible for writing on should therefore be made of all suicide cases at the death scene prior to transport of the body, so that any skin messaging can be accurately recorded. Not only will

this be of use to investigating police and pathologists, but such messages may have great significance to surviving family members and friends.

Ethical approval

Forensic Science South Australia.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

None.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Forensic Science SA for permission to publish selected details of these cases.

References

1. Austin AE, van den Heuvel C, Byard RW. Suicide in forensic practice – an Australian perspective. *Aust J Forensic Sci* 2011;**43**:65–76.
2. Byard RW, Markopoulos D, Prasad D, Eitzen D, James RA, Blackbourne B, et al. Early adolescent suicide: a comparative study. *J Clin Forensic Med* 2000;**7**:6–9.
3. Byard RW, Heath KJ. Suicide notes, age and the impact of suicide guides. *Scand J Forensic Sci* 2007;**13**:10–1.
4. Demirci S, Dogan KH, Erkol Z, Gunaydin G. Unusual suicide notes written on the body. Two case reports. *Am J Forensic Med Pathol* 2009;**30**:276–9.
5. Foster T. Suicide note themes and suicide prevention. *Int J Psychiatr Med* 2003;**33**:323–31.
6. Jensen LJ, Byard RW. Coincident deaths – double suicide or murder-suicide? *Med Sci Law* 2009;**49**:27–32.
7. Byard RW, Knight D, James RA, Gilbert J. Murder-suicides involving children – a 29 year study. *Am J Forensic Med Pathol* 1999;**20**:323–7.
8. Byard RW, Veldhoen D, Kobus H, Heath K. ‘Murder-suicide’ or ‘murder-accident’? Difficulties with the analysis of cases. *J Forensic Sci* 2010;**55**:1375–7.
9. Austin A, van den Heuvel C, Byard RW. Cluster hanging suicides in the young in South Australia. *J Forensic Sci* 2011;**56**:1528–30.